

Introduction to the Special Issue on “Social and Motivational Processes in After-School Settings: Bridging Gaps Between Theory, Research, and Practice”

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Abstract

This special issue of the *Journal of Early Adolescence* presents research exploring the social and motivational processes thought to contribute to early adolescent engagement and participation in after-school and out-of-school time as well as to targeted proximal and more distal developmental outcomes. Articles in the special issue address three broad themes, including (a) the *role of internally and externally regulated motivation* in joining programs and sustaining participation over time, (b) how programs may *meet the developmental and relational needs of participants*, and (c) *social processes as mediators of proximal outcomes*. Directions for future research on social and motivational processes in after-school programs are discussed.

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Considerable attention has been given in recent years to understanding the characteristics of after-school programs that contribute to positive youth development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Durlak and Weissberg's (2007) meta-analysis showed that programmatic features, such as the use of evidence-based skills training curricula, contribute to stronger and more positive effects on developmental outcomes. Whereas most reviews have also pointed to the importance of social and motivational processes in contributing to the success of after-school programs (Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert, & Parente, 2010; Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008), achieving clear conceptual and operational definitions remains elusive.

The term "after school programs" refers to a diverse array of structured programs offered to school-age children and adolescents (kindergarten through high school) outside of the typical school day. Such programs are designed to provide supervised activities that encourage learning and development (Little et al., 2008). The types of activities can vary widely, including academic enrichment, sports and nutrition, tutoring, mentoring, arts, technology, science, and civic engagement, to name just a few.

This special issue of the *Journal of Early Adolescence* presents research exploring the social and motivational processes thought to contribute to early adolescent engagement and participation in after-school and out-of-school time as well as to targeted proximal and more distal developmental outcomes. In researching the effectiveness of after-school programs on affecting youth outcomes, it is important to keep in mind that most after-school programs are voluntary in the sense that youth and their families typically have some degree of choice in selecting a program, deciding how much time and energy to commit to it, and whether to remain in it over an extended period of time. Thus, it is important to consider the factors that motivate youth to participate and the types of experiences that maintain their engagement over time. Motivation and program experiences can also mediate the link between participation and youth development outcomes. This special issue seeks to shine a spotlight on these processes.

What do we mean by social and motivational processes? Our thinking, as shown in Figure 1, is guided by a "timeline" describing a progression from youths' and their families' choosing to join an after-school program, becoming engaged in its activities and processes, committing energy and time to the

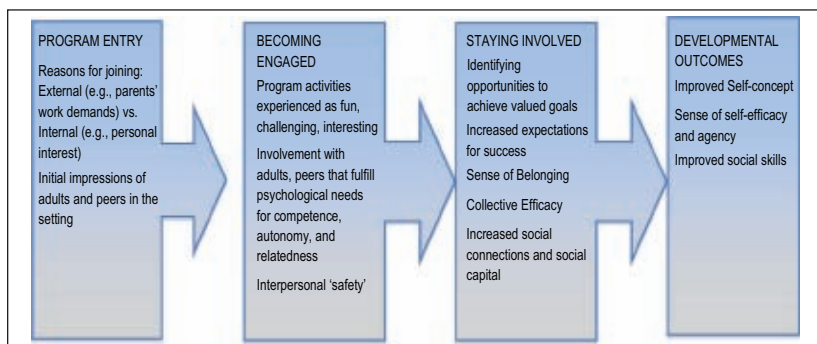


Figure 1. Illustrative social and motivational processes from program entry through sustained involvement over time.

program over time, and eventually experiencing proximal benefits from their participation. Informed by motivational theories, particularly self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008), we consider the attitudes and expectations that young people bring into the program; experiences of competence, autonomy, and relatedness that support increasing internalization of personal goals; and how motivations might change over the course of youths' participation. Also informed by theorizing and recent empirical work specifically on youth development and after-school programs (e.g., Dawes & Larson, 2011; Hirsch, 2005; Larson, 2000), we consider experiences gained through participation that provide youth with a sense of challenge and of connection to peers and adults. We illustrate each point in the timeline with factors that are likely to play a key role. The figure is not intended to imply a causal sequence, in part, because we expect many of the factors listed to be mutually reinforcing over time.

The five articles in the special issue illustrate many of the social and motivational processes that begin prior to a child's joining a program and extend through the realization of proximal developmental outcomes. The articles employ a range of methodologies to report quantitative data from observational and experimental studies and qualitative data from in-depth participant observation and interviews. The articles are presented in an order that roughly corresponds to the timeline and address three underlying themes. The first two articles address the *role of internally and externally regulated motivation* when youth first join a program and as they choose whether to remain engaged in it. Next, two articles delve into the ways that programs seek to

meet the developmental and relational needs of participants. The final article addresses *social processes as mediators of proximal outcomes.* These themes and the corresponding articles are discussed in the paragraphs that follow. We conclude by offering directions for future research on social and motivational processes in after-school programs.

The Role of Internal and External Motivation

Berry and LaVelle (2013) consider a simple measure in which program participants endorse internal (e.g., “I wanted to join”) or external (e.g., “My parents wanted me to join) reasons for joining an after school program. Drawing on self-determination theory, they hypothesized that youth who endorsed internal reasons would be more likely than youth with external reasons experience increases in autonomy, trust in program staff, self-efficacy, and prosocial behavior. This simple, face-valid measure yielded findings very much in line with their hypotheses. The authors also asked the same question about reasons for joining at the posttest, at the end of the school year, thus assessing youths’ retrospective recall of their reasons for joining. Interestingly, youth who “switched” their reasons from external to internal had positive outcomes while youth whose reasons were external at the posttest showed notable declines in socioemotional outcomes. The findings point to the importance of fostering internalized motivation for sustained participation in after-school programs, even among youth who initially do not endorse strong personal motivation for entering the program. A next step in this research would be to consider the factors that contribute to youth acquiring (or maintaining) an internalized motivation for continued participation. Given the time constraints inherent in conducting evaluations of many after-school programs, developing brief, but valid measures or indicators of important constructs is also an important focus. Thus, although the simple measure in this study requires further validation and refinement, it offers a practical way of incorporating important psychological constructs in program evaluations.

In their description of Project Step Up, a high school program for students at risk of school failure and dropout, Gopalan et al. (2013) emphasize the role of extrinsic rewards—in the form of monetary incentives for attending weekly sessions and improving grades—for promoting sustained program participation. The authors document impressive weekly attendance and within-year retention rates in a high-risk sample of urban, minority adolescents. Although this focus on monetary rewards seems to stand in contrast to Berry and LaVelle (2013), who highlight the importance of intrinsic or

internalized motivation for program engagement, it should be noted that youth can be simultaneously motivated by both internal and external reasons (Shahar, Henrich, Blatt, Ryan, & Little, 2003). Gopalan and colleagues raise the provocative suggestion that extrinsic rewards may be an important source of motivation for participation in after-school programs.

Project Step Up also emphasizes the importance of staff-student connections. Gopalan and colleagues indicate that staff have daily contact with students, in and out of the program, in-person or through text messages. Through addressing the adolescent need for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008), the program's focus on connecting students and staff may account for its high participation rates. The design of the Gopalan et al. study does not however allow for the two program foci on extrinsic rewards and staff-student connections to be teased apart.

Meeting Youths Developmental and Relational Needs

Considerable conceptual work has sought to identify the features of after-school settings that foster youth development. Jones and Deutch (2013) use a developmental-ecological paradigm to explore the degree to which after-school settings are sensitive to the changing developmental needs of adolescents. A major task of adolescence is thought to be increasing identity development (Erikson, 1994); individualization and autonomy and settings that foster this sort of growth are viewed as supportive of youth development (Larson, 2000). The authors argue that adults can support healthy transitions (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004, as cited in Jones & Deutch, 2013) with engaging activities (Barber, Stone, Hunt, & Eccles, 2004; Dworkin, Larson, & Hanson, 2003).

This article uses ethnographic methods to explore ways in which staff at an urban Boys and Girls Club serving youth aged 11 to 18 focus on the developmental needs of students. The authors observe that the activities and staff-child relationships for preadolescent youth were characterized by a high degree of structure. The staff frequently checked in with these youth and worked to make even transitional activities fun and engaging. Older adolescent youth, in contrast, were given more freedom and responsibility for retrieving necessary program materials and snacks and interacted with the staff in more "peer-like" ways. Their activities also required more autonomy such as in a College Prep program in which mid-adolescents were involved in goal setting and planning. These age-graded differences provide evidence of programmatic attentiveness to person- and developmental stage-environment

fit (see Eccles et al., 1993). Though after-school programs vary widely across locales, this study offers insights into how natural shifts in the ways activities are structured in after-school programs can support youths' growth and maturation.

As mentoring is increasingly being incorporated into after school programs (e.g., Kuperminc, Thomason, DiMeo, & Broomfield-Massey, 2011), there is growing recognition of how interactions among youth and between adults and youth can play a role in program outcomes. Deutsch, Wiggins, Henneberger, and Lawrence (2013) describe relational processes in the Young Women's Leadership program. In that program, a one-to-one mentoring program is supplemented with weekly group-based activities in an after-school setting. This mixed-method study found substantial variation in youths' satisfaction with their one-to-one mentoring relationship and generally high satisfaction with the group experience. Interestingly, youth with positive one-to-one mentoring relationships engaged in more positive interactions in the group setting (e.g., showing caring for others), whereas youth who were dissatisfied with their one-to-one mentoring relationships showed more negative social behaviors (e.g., disengagement) in the group context. Feelings of connection to the group were evident when mentors were able to skillfully navigate difficult interpersonal conflicts in ways that diffused the immediate situation while affirming the importance of the relationship with their mentee. Because mentoring relationships often emerge "naturally" even in programs that do not incorporate a formal mentoring component (see Hirsch, 2005), these findings offer insights that can generalize beyond traditional mentoring programs. Specifically, the findings point to the importance of ensuring that adult leaders in after school programs are trained in group dynamics (e.g., conflict resolution) and have a clear sense that the relationships they form with youth can influence the extent to which those youth are able to benefit from what the program has to offer.

Individual- and Setting-Level Social Processes as Mediators of Proximal Outcomes

Social processes are also potential mediators of the efficacy of new prevention strategies implemented in after-school programs. For example, after-school programs are being explored as settings that can encourage physical activity and reduced obesity (Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005). Bohnert and Ward (2013) examine the Girls in the Game program, which was designed to increase physical activity and healthy eating and decrease obesity, acknowledging the role of efficacy in health behaviors. In the context of a random-

ized outcome trial, the researchers explore the role of socioemotional factors, including levels of self-esteem, body image, and competence, and important programmatic processes, including implementation quality, program participation, and program quality. Girls in the intervention condition reported more self-reported physical activity, higher levels of nutritional knowledge, and healthier eating than girls in the control condition across time. Furthermore, these effects were obtained while girls in the program exhibited less acceptance of emaciated body types; endorsing healthier body types is associated with less disordered eating. These effects were not mediated or moderated by global self-esteem or social competence as hypothesized. However, *program-level* processes did contribute to the strength of these efforts to enhance girls' healthy practices. Girls who attended more in programs with higher-quality implementation, which were rated by observers using the YPQA as more engaging, exhibited more nutritional knowledge. The findings were mixed in that programs with lower levels of engagement exhibited more physical activity. It is plausible that after-school programs lacking other activities and resources may rely more heavily on physical activity as one of the offerings. This study contributes to the literature by considering potential socioemotional processes for individual girls, and program-level processes, including implementation quality and engagement. This research also supports after-school programs as settings for prevention and promotion.

Future Directions

The exploration by the articles in this special issue of how after-school programs can promote and sustain youth participation and make an impact on proximal outcomes by helping fulfill youths' social and motivational needs represents a beginning. We suggest several avenues for future research on social and motivational processes in after-school programs. First, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2009) offers a useful heuristic for examining these processes. Although reasons for joining an after-school program can be intrinsic (e.g., because it is fun) or extrinsic (e.g., because it is necessary given parents' work schedules), sustained involvement and program engagement is likely driven by the internalization of motivation for after-school participation. This process of internalization from externally controlled behavior to internally regulated and autonomous motivation is facilitated by youth feeling that after-school programs meet their developmental needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

In support of this assertion, Berry and LaVelle (2013) demonstrate that youths' reasons for participating do change and can become internalized over time. In addition, Jones and Deutch (2013) provide examples of how programs can promote this process of internalization through meeting youths' developmental needs. In contrast, Gopalan et al. (2013) show that a program emphasizing extrinsic rewards for participation had impressively high attendance rates. Future research should focus on (a) the effectiveness of multiple strategies in combination for engaging adolescents in after-school programs, in terms of both recruitment and sustained participation, and (b) the extent to which different types of strategies may be differentially effective for different types of students, based on age, sociodemographic characteristics, and developmental needs. For example, the *match hypothesis* stipulates that youth with a more externally regulated orientation may be more responsive to extrinsic rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2009). To date, there is not much empirical support for the match hypothesis (Ryan & Deci, 2009), but it has yet to be tested in terms of strategies for promoting motivation in after-school programs from program entry through sustained involvement.

Another avenue for future research from a self-determination perspective is the role of competencies and skills, listed in Figure 1 as developmental outcomes. Experiencing gains in these areas may also play a role in motivating youth to become engaged and stay involved in after-school programs. Theoretically, activities designed to build skills should, through meeting the need for competence, promote youths' engagement in programs (Larson, 2000), and the more youth are engaged and participate, the stronger the effects of after-school programs should be on academic and social outcomes (Mahoney et al., 2005).

A third avenue for future research is expanding the focus of social and motivational processes that go beyond the individual. Over the past decade, the field has recognized out-of-school time as an opportunity for exposing youth to a plethora of activities, including arts, journalism, leadership, and civic engagement (Dawes & Larson, 2011). Through these activities youth are provided opportunities to form relationships outside of their family, school, and neighborhood contexts that help to build their knowledge, skills, and abilities (Kuperminc, Thomason, DiMeo, & Broomfield-Massey, 2011). This access to social capital may be a critical ingredient in social mobility, particularly for youth living in conditions of economic disadvantage (Ferguson, 2006). Within the after-school program itself, youth can be active agents in creating the social norms that permeate these settings. Youth collective efficacy refers to a sense of social cohesion and bonding with others in the program along with a social norm in which the youth perceive that as a

group they are willing and empowered to intervene in positive ways to discourage bullying and antisocial behavior and to promote positive behavioral norms. Thus, there are other emerging and novel social processes that can be assessed in after-school settings.

Family engagement is another process through which after-school programs can promote social capital. The focus in the after-school field on engaging families is relatively new (Harris, Rosenberg, & Wallace, 2012; Rosenberg, Harris, & Wilkes, 2012). Already, there is emerging evidence that family engagement in after-school programs is linked to youth program participation, proximal outcomes, and increased parent involvement in other settings (Bouffard, O'Carroll, Westmoreland, & Little, 2011). Continued research is needed on the social and motivational processes that promote parents becoming engaged and staying involved in after-school programs as well as how program activities can be structured to meet the needs of both parents and youth.

In conclusion, as the title indicates, this special issue was motivated in part by a desire to bridge theory, research, and practice. Each of the articles in this special issue points to the possibility that motivational and social processes do not need to be left to chance. Instead, intentional efforts on the part of programs are needed to fine-tune their programming and ensure staff training in ways that address young people's motivations; seek to support their psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness; and are aligned with their developmental needs. We hope that this special issue helps to catalyze new research in the area of social and motivational processes.

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Bios

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